

Jack Klumpenhower

SHOW

THEM

JESUS

Teaching *the*
Gospel *to* Kids

“Sunday school curriculum is relentlessly moralistic. That is, it tells you *what* to do, but not *how* to do it. Jack Klumpenhowe shows us *how* by taking us back to the person and work of Christ. Every Sunday school teacher should read this book.”

Paul Miller, Director of seeJesus; author of *A Praying Life* and *A Loving Life*

“Klumpenhowe states the problem well: ‘Today, a frightening number of kids are growing up in churches and Christian homes without ever being captured by the gospel of Jesus.’ We want them to know about Jesus, but we leave them with lessons about behavior and they leave the church as soon as possible. Here’s a book that sweetly, masterfully, and powerfully tells us what the gospel really is and how it can really change a child’s life and eternity.”

Bryan Chapell, Author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*; pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, IL

“*Show Them Jesus* is a must read for every youth worker, children’s ministry teacher, parent, and VBS volunteer. Jack Klumpenhowe does a masterful job helping us learn how to discover the gospel connections in every Bible story. In sharing example after example from his years of experience, Jack gives the reader a front-row seat in his classroom to learn how to give children a ‘rock-their-world’ vision of Jesus. This is the perfect training tool for pastors and children’s ministry leaders to use to train their teachers. I’ll be buying a copy for all my children’s ministry leaders.”

Marty Machowski, Family Life Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, PA; author of the *Gospel Story for Kids* curriculum

“Jack’s book has done a very rare thing—he has taken the message of grace and applied it simply and directly to both teachers’ hearts and the children they shepherd. He doesn’t settle for mere external obedience in his students but bravely and compassionately goes much deeper, seeking out their hearts. This is a great application of Serge’s values to a central part of every church—its children.”

Bob Osborne, Executive Director, Serge

“*Show Them Jesus* deals with the tough questions that keep children’s ministry leaders up at night. How do I encourage kids to repent and obey without becoming a legalist? Should I tone down Old Testament violence when I’m teaching fourth graders? Klumpenhower answers these questions and more with his eyes on Jesus from first to last. But he doesn’t just speak to the head. He engages heart and hands as well, giving teachers an inspiring and practical framework for preparing Bible lessons, classroom environments, and family ministry where Jesus is the focus. I plan to purchase a copy for every volunteer in our children’s ministry.”

Jared Kennedy, Family Pastor, Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY

“The most common way of teaching a Bible story to children involves holding up the main human character and encouraging (or discouraging) children to be like him or her. *Show Them Jesus: Teaching the Gospel to Kids* provides welcome relief. The book is packed full of biblical reasons, practical guidance, and bountiful examples for teachers and parents who want to show children Jesus when they teach the Bible.”

Starr Meade, Author of *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions based on the Shorter Catechism* and *Mighty Acts of God: a Family Bible Story Book*

“In *Show Them Jesus*, Jack Klumpenhower tells how to make Spirit-fed renewal, which springs from a foundation of love for Jesus, the overarching theme of our teaching. He impresses on us the importance of being ‘good-news’ teachers who ‘exit’ every Bible story through the cross of Christ. Make your aim in teaching to build in your kids love for Jesus, because that’s where the Christian life begins. Read this book for your kids; and reread it for yourself.”

Nancy Winter, Curriculum writer and editor; long-time Sunday school teacher.

“This book is a must read for every Christian and challenges us to ask the question: How are we handling the good news about Jesus? Do we really believe that Jesus is the goal of God’s great story of redemption—‘*the way, the truth, and the life*’? Jack reminds us that our teaching and application of the Scripture is to be unflinchingly centered on Jesus. Why? So we can all fall more in love with Him and worship Him wholeheartedly!”

Rosemarie Green, Director of Children’s Ministry, New Life Church, Glenside, PA

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Teaching the Gospel
to Kids

Jack Klumpenhower



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Introduction

The Crew of Seventy-Two

The church I attended had a problem. It attracted many families, and parents eagerly brought their children to Sunday school and to mid-week youth meetings—all good things. The trouble was, there never seemed to be enough volunteers to teach all those kids. Since I *did* teach, I was invited to help solve the problem.

We tried everything. Each year as the dreaded recruitment season arrived, the pastor issued appeals from the pulpit. We printed bulletin inserts. We personally asked our friends in the church to consider teaching. We begged for volunteers. But people kept telling us they were too busy, or that they weren't good at teaching.

So we made teaching easier. The church staff prepared all materials. An easy-to-follow lesson with games and crafts was waiting each week for the teacher, who simply had to show up. And although we held a weekly prayer meeting for teachers, we stressed that attending prayer was purely optional.

The teacher shortage just grew worse. You can probably see what we were doing wrong, but I didn't get it until one day when I was trying to talk another guy into becoming a teacher. I still remember the

ridiculously insulting words I blurted out. I told him, “It’s easy. Most of the work is done for you. And I think you’d be perfect for the job.”

I might as well have used the old line that any idiot could do it, and that he was just the idiot I had in mind. My friend gave me an odd look, and I realized how foolish I’d been. I’d forgotten that although teachers do want support, no one likes to give even a minute of their time for ministry that’s so easy it must be unimportant. And I’d arrogantly figured I was the sort of devoted teacher who might spend hours working on a lesson for the sake of Jesus, but others were not. It’s a mistake I never want to make again.

So, then. There are many good books designed to make your teaching easier, but this is not one of them.

A JOB WITH JESUS

Luke’s Gospel tells how Jesus faced a problem similar to the teacher shortage. He was looking for workers to proclaim the kingdom of God. A series of prospects offered to help, on their terms. Jesus turned them down. He spoke of the work involved and the cost. Then he appointed seventy-two others to do the job. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road” (Luke 10:2–4).

Later, we learn what happened: “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven’” (Luke 10:17–20).

Jesus tells us that the work of proclaiming God’s kingdom is dangerous. It takes courage. It demands earnest prayer. It’s more about faith than giftedness, and it requires no resources other than those

God provides. It's a high-stakes spiritual battle, using supernatural weapons. Anyone who's willing to engage the fight on this level is needed for the cause. Such an adventurer will reap a rare mix of power, humility, and wide-eyed joy.

Doesn't that sound better than the namby-pamby Sunday school I was trying to sell?

As I've talked with other committed teachers—those at church as well as parents who teach about Jesus at home—I've finally learned that what Jesus was talking about is why they keep at it. They want to make a real difference, for God and for their kids. They know it's hard work; they know that the devil Jesus spoke of will fight back. That's okay. They feel called by God and are itching to speak the good news of Jesus in all its wonder—whatever that takes.

None of us does this well all the time. We get busy or tired or sloppy. We too often give in to mediocre expectations. But amid this slumber, we dream of being like the seventy-two. So we need to encourage each other to live up to our calling.

That's the purpose of this book.

WHY THOSE KIDS REALLY, REALLY NEED YOU

This book's main point is that we are called to teach the good news—all Jesus is and all he's done by his life, death, and resurrection to save those who're joined to him—and to treasure it as we work with kids. Since most prepackaged lessons and family devotionals don't do this, you'll need to make a deliberate effort. However, your effort will be doing the kids you teach a profound service.

Today, a frightening number of kids are growing up in churches and Christian homes without ever being captured by the gospel of Jesus. As children and teenagers they may seem to be believers, but then they reach their college and young-adult years and quit. They quit church—and any growing commitment to Jesus.

These kids actually have good reasons to quit. They look back and realize that they learned much about Christian behavior and churchy experiences, but whatever they learned about Jesus didn't

really change them. They never saw him so strikingly that he became their one, overriding hope and their greatest love. They were never convinced that Jesus is better—a zillion times better—than anything and everything else.

Our goal must be for kids to catch this rock-their-world vision of Jesus. Is this far-fetched? Not at all. We have the message of God's love in Christ. We also have prayer and the Holy Spirit. We *have* the weapons to win this supernatural war. Knowing this, we must faithfully show kids, at every opportunity, how Jesus *is* that much better. We must also believe it ourselves, so that our lives among these kids confirm Jesus's power to change sinners.

Yes, in some ways it's hard. But because it's built on the good news—"your names are written in heaven"—rather than how "successful" we are, it isn't a burden. It's world-shaking, yet pressure-free.

How does this work? Let me share one example.

A SCARY LESSON

A few years ago I was teaching a large group of elementary kids from the book of Joshua. I taught how God brought his people through the Jordan River and toppled the walls of Jericho. From there, the curriculum I was using skipped a chapter—the story of Achan.

Achan was an Israelite soldier. He spurned a direct command from God by taking some of the plunder of Jericho for himself. His sin was uncovered when God caused the Israelites to be routed in a subsequent battle. To reveal whose sin was responsible, God used a dread-filled process of picking first the tribe, then the clan, then the family at fault. The members of the guilty family came forward one by one, and God picked Achan. So the people stoned Achan, along with his wife, children, and livestock. Then they set them on fire and heaped stones on their charred bodies. Only after that did God turn from his anger.

Well now, it's easy to see why that story gets skipped.

What should I do? I don't like picking through the Bible for just the cheery parts, but my group of kids was fairly young. I was worried

that the lesson might be too scary. I finally decided I could teach about Achan—if I made sure that the good news of Jesus was my theme.

One of my helpers that day was also the mom of a student. Just before class she asked what the lesson was, and when I told her she became worried. Her daughter got nightmares, she explained. Tense stories often brought them on. I got a sick feeling. Surely I'd been stupid to think I could teach such a lesson to little kids. But there was no time to change it, so I taught about Achan. Dead soldiers. Selection process. Stoning. Fire. The whole ugly scene.

As I taught this, the concerned mom looked even more worried. So did some of the kids, who were particularly bothered that the other soldiers, family members, and animals got killed too. What had they done to deserve that? It was a good question, so I had the whole group gather around me as I sat on the floor with them.

“Yes, many were killed,” I told them, “but that’s what we should learn from this.” I read to them the Bible’s own commentary on the incident: “Didn’t the LORD’s anger come on the whole community of Israel? And Achan wasn’t the only one who died because of his sin” (Joshua 22:20, NIV).

“You see,” I said, “just one man sinned, but many died. That’s the lesson.”

The kids gave me confused looks. It wasn’t the sort of lesson anyone was expecting. I had their attention and pressed on.

“What if *you* sin? Or I sin? Does God punish us like he did Achan? Does anyone else get punished too? Or has God made a way to punish sin that has a better ending than this story has?”

The kids weren’t sure. Several knew that God wouldn’t be holy if he didn’t punish sin. They also knew that God forgives. They weren’t certain how it all fit together.

“The idea that a person might die for someone else’s sin is very important,” I said. “In our story, one man sinned but many died. But what if later in the Bible we found one man—just one man—who never sinned in his whole life, but still got punished? If that man never sinned but still died, then many could live.”

They knew I was talking about Jesus.

I went on to tell how Jesus lived the sin-free life each of us don't. I told how out of all the tribes and clans and families of the world, only Jesus is not guilty—so God picked him. To die. To take our place. God selected Jesus to take the punishment we deserve so we don't have to stand sinful and quaking, waiting for judgment like Achan did.

“Your sin is very bad,” I told the kids. “It can hurt many people. But God loves you so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to become a man and die for your sin. Jesus was hurt most of all.

“I wasn't sure I should tell you this story because I thought it might be too scary. It's about the scariest thing ever—getting punished by God. But when you know the whole story, it isn't scary. If you belong to Jesus, he took your punishment and God becomes your Father. So I hope you won't be scared. You don't have to be scared of anything. Jesus makes the scariest thing of all go away.”

I knew I'd done okay once it was over because the worried mom thanked me. She loved the story. The real surprise, though, came a few weeks later. The mom came up to me with a huge grin and told me her daughter's nightmares had stopped. The girl insisted it was because she knew that, due to Jesus, she didn't have to be scared anymore.

Well, that's the kind of result a teacher very rarely hears of, and my first reaction was skepticism. Could a little lesson about Jesus really cure such a problem? The nightmares would probably come back in time. But months went by and the mom remained delighted.

I finally came to see that *I* was the one who lacked faith in the power of the good news. In spite of teaching it, I never expected it to work so wonderfully. It was all due to Jesus, of course, who lived the story I had the privilege of repeating. There's no story like it. I should have expected such results.

When the account of Achan is taught at all, it's usually with the moral point that stealing is wrong. Okay, but that girl needed to hear the larger biblical point: that sin destroys life with God. Then she needed the biggest point of all—the theme of the whole Bible: that wherever sin destroys, Jesus heals.

That girl learned about Jesus and believed. She also discovered that belief in Jesus is life-changing, that he truly is better than anything else.

THE TEACHERS' MANIFESTO

So who am I to write this book? Well, I'm no expert. I've never been employed full-time by a school or church. I have stories to share, but they're as much about failure as success, and about what I've learned along the way. Some of it I'm not very good at yet. I still struggle.

I'm only a parent and volunteer who works with children and youth, leading lessons and other Christian activities. I'm just a Bible teacher—like you.

Yes, *you* are a teacher. Even if your role isn't teaching prepared lessons but one of the many other important jobs in children's or youth ministry, or if you lead your own kids in family devotions or home lessons—or want to start!—it's still teaching. Kids are watching and learning from you, and you have the job of showing them Jesus.

Most of what I'll share comes from my experience in the classroom because that's where I've learned to teach about Jesus. But once we grab hold of these ideas, they go wherever we go. I use them in more casual encounters with kids too, as well as at home with my own children. I'll help you apply them wherever *you* work with kids.

I'm going to assume that you too are a non-expert. The teachers Jesus recruited didn't start out well-equipped or particularly skilled either—so if you feel hesitant, or unsure you can teach a lesson like the one I just described, you're in a good place. I'm simply looking for parents, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, Bible club directors, camp counselors, song leaders—anyone who works with kids—to join me in this manifesto:

We pledge to teach the good news and show kids Jesus.

In this book, I'll suggest what that might look like. I'll tell my own story in the process, changing only names and other details to protect the kids. I'm going to let you see how I've done things because I know

from experience that observing other teachers—for both faults and strengths—is the best way to improve. I'll also give examples of how I've taught many familiar Bible stories. None of my examples is the only good way to teach those stories, but all of them celebrate Jesus.

In the first half of the book, I'll explain *why* teaching the good news is so important and give you ways to get started. I hope this will renew your excitement to tell about Jesus. Nothing helps more than for you, the teacher, to develop an incurable case of "Jesus fever."

In the second half, I'll share what I've learned about *how* to show kids Jesus. After thirty-odd years of both my own teaching and picking up tips from others, I have ideas and methods that work. Please take what you can use, add to it, and fit it to your own ministry. Build on it. Make it better. Don't stop until your teaching is everything Jesus said it could be.

Whenever God's people rediscover the good news, revival often follows—so we will be playing with fire. Our manifesto is subversive. It will put us at odds with both devils and do-gooders. Keeping it will require an entire life of becoming more deeply dependent on the transforming work of God's Spirit. It's for those of us who want to raise our game to the level of the seventy-two.

Are you with me? Let's get started.

Section One

Why Teach the Good News?

Chapter 1

The One-Note Teacher

Because Jesus is everything we need

A sermon without Christ!
As well talk of a loaf of bread without any flour in it.
How can it feed the soul?

—Charles Spurgeon¹

Let me take you back to the beginning: for many years I thought I was a good teacher. Then everything changed.

My gift was teaching interesting Sunday school lessons. I knew the Bible well and told its stories creatively so that younger kids looked forward to story time. Teens happily discussed Bible passages. Even adults would stop by to sit in on my classes. My lessons had a point too. I would build to a climactic moment that taught about living for God. I led discussions applying it to daily life. Kids left with practical instruction they could put to work in the coming week.

Every so often I would teach about how Jesus died for our sins. For those lessons the practical point would be the need to accept him as Savior. Even without asking for on-the-spot decisions, this was sometimes awkward. There was the pressure of the topic, the need to be inviting but not pushy—and always the eerie sadness of the cross itself. But I prayed extra hard before those lessons, hunkered down, and taught them.

I felt good about my “ministry niche” and wouldn’t have changed a thing. But then God let me hear about Joe.

Joe was a fellow teacher who seemed smart enough, but bland—not the type who might captivate a group of kids. Yet Joe began teaching large-group lessons like I was doing. Others who saw him teach liked his lessons. They told me I might like them too. By the third time someone told me how good Joe was, I felt threatened. So I took the bait.

I decided to sit in on one of Joe’s lessons. I took a seat in the back of the room and reminded myself to be neither jealous nor smug—to resist comparing his teaching with mine—but I couldn’t help it. I was hoping I’d watch Joe teach and then be able to reassure myself I was still top dog in my teaching circle.

LEARNING FROM JOE

Joe’s lesson was about Samuel, who was still a boy when God called him to be a prophet. I recognized it as an ideal lesson for any storyteller. It’s about a child, so kids can relate, and the story builds to a nice climax. God calls repeatedly to Samuel at night. Samuel trots off each time to Eli the priest, whom he thinks must be the one calling. Eli eventually figures out what’s happening and tells Samuel to respond and listen to God.

The Samuel story offers an opportunity to teach about being a good listener. Samuel listened, and God did great things through him. How could our students listen at home? At school? On the playground? What might God do if they listened better? I settled in to observe Joe’s lesson. I wondered which of these themes he’d draw out, and how.

Although Joe wasn’t a dynamic speaker, I had to admit he set the stage well for Samuel’s big moment. He explained how God was largely silent in the days before Samuel. The rulers in the land were inept and the priests corrupt. The last big-time prophet had died centuries before. The people needed God to bring justice, and they were hungry to hear him speak.

Joe had a reason for that setup. To my surprise, his lesson didn't focus on Samuel's effort to listen but on God's desire to call out. Joe mentioned how God actually came and stood near Samuel's bed while calling his name. I'd never noticed that. And Joe discussed with the kids how God called with such a normal voice that Samuel was sure it must be Eli.

Joe was excited at how, after all that waiting, God's voice of justice came gently, personally, and humanlike to a child. "What does that tell you about God?" Joe asked. To show how God still speaks personally and humanly, he then read from Hebrews 1:1–2: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."

By his *Son*? Joe was turning the lesson toward Jesus. I was impressed. It was a gutsy move I wouldn't have dared try. Bringing up Jesus when he wasn't already in the story always felt uncomfortable to me. But Joe pressed on. He said that Jesus came down and spoke too. Jesus taught us in ways no other prophet could. He showed us the face of God by walking among us and laughing with us, by scolding bullies and casting out demons, by looking into our sad eyes with tears in his own.

Most of all, Jesus spoke by dying on the cross. By bringing both justice and love to us in this way, he spoke the most beautiful word anyone could. Centuries before, God had left heaven to stand beside Samuel. In Jesus, God left all that glory to live beside you and me, and to die in place of you and me.

Now, Joe said, Jesus is risen. He gives his Spirit to speak to our hearts, in words soft enough to melt us and packed with the power we need to obey. God has spoken and he continues to speak—like never before.

A Taste of Jesus

I'm probably making Joe's lesson sound smoother than it actually was. Frankly, he stumbled around a lot as he said all this. His delivery

was dry. Some of the kids got fidgety. Still, I sensed his focus on Jesus was the right way to teach the Bible, and I waited for the sales pitch—the part about accepting Jesus as Savior. But Joe never went there. He said a prayer—a real prayer asking that what we learned about Jesus would touch our hearts—and he was done.

Where was the application? Wasn't he at least going to tell the kids how to listen like Samuel? No. Gradually, I saw that Joe's chief purpose was just to let us see Jesus a little bigger and better than we'd seen him before.

Joe did lead a discussion to help the kids connect what they learned to life on the playground. He suggested that when they're the target of unkind words they might remember how God spoke to Samuel, and how richly Jesus had spoken to them. This would help them respond in a godly way to mean talk. But it was more about the heart than it was a rule.

It was good for Joe to make that connection. And it worked because, before Joe ever got to that point, his lesson had already begun stirring kids' hearts—and mine. It worked because the cross of Jesus—not principles for good living—is the engine of the Christian life. By simply getting a taste of Jesus, I was eager to listen to God in a way that wouldn't have happened if Joe had *told* me to listen. Joy in Jesus *was* the application!

To Know Nothing but Jesus

Joe understood Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, and he helped me to understand it as well.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul's statement that he decided to teach *nothing* but Jesus and the cross is a jaw-dropper. *Nothing* else? Does he really mean that? If he does, then the implications for our own teaching are profound. Consider three things this passage tells us.

First, the content of the message matters; it must be about Jesus. Corinth was a stopping point for traveling sages who spouted wisdom about personal success and religious insight. Paul would not be one of them. His message about the cross of Christ was so superior that he spoke it plainly—weakly, he says, with trembling. He let the cross itself do the talking.

We shouldn't take this to mean that lively presentations are bad. Joe might have benefited from a more engaging style. But he got the main thing right. Joe had the same single-mindedness Paul had. What mattered was Christ crucified. Joe determined that his time with the kids would revolve around Jesus, and he pushed other considerations aside. He understood that those kids had school teachers or Sesame Street to tell them how to be good listeners. They needed *him* to show them something better—how Christ speaks so stunningly that listening will never be the same.

Second, the cross of Christ applies to the entire Christian life. It isn't just something you believe to become a Christian. It's also the framework for living *as* a Christian. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half and spent that time teaching—just the cross. Perhaps after a while the Corinthian believers told Paul they were ready for new material. They knew this cross stuff. He could move on. But the beauty of Jesus's cross is so vast one could spend a lifetime catching just a fraction of it.

In fact, Paul did address a variety of topics in the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians alone, he gives instructions about bickering, sexual sin, marriage—even hairstyles. Does this mean he's exaggerating when he says Christ is his only message? No. It means that the most powerful way to handle *every* sin in the life of the church is to apply a deeper understanding of the cross of Christ.

If Joe's lesson had included God's call to initial belief in Jesus, that would have been okay. But by teaching the cross of Jesus without that

invitation, Joe did something powerful. He treated the cross as ongoing fuel, even for kids who were already Christians.

Third, faith in this message comes from God. There's every reason to speak God's message God's way—because it's God who brings true repentance and spiritual growth.

Here lies the real reason I didn't make the cross the theme of my own lessons: I thought it felt corny. I didn't want to try too hard to be spiritual when I should be, well, more normal. I thought I knew what would work best with the kids I taught, and *what would make me look wise*. Although I claimed to rely on God, I feared entrusting my teaching to his ideas and the Holy Spirit's tools.

The message of Jesus's death and resurrection is a tool of the Spirit to change hearts. Nagging is not. Rather than coax the kids into temporarily *acting* better, Joe told about Jesus and trusted God to use that message to make the kids *become* better.

EUANGÉLION

In Bible times, the Greek word for “good news” or “gospel” (*euangélion*) was not a religious word. It was used for good news brought by a herald—perhaps news of a battle won or a king crowned—something everyone needed to hear and respond to. Jesus and the New Testament writers latched onto this word and used it to express the core of Christianity.

In Luke, *euangélion* is the approach God takes to the arrival of Jesus. The angel's announcement to the shepherds is: “I bring you good news (*euangélion*) of great joy” (Luke 2:10). Luke goes on to use the word more than twenty times in the books of Luke and Acts.

In Mark, *euangélion* is the first thing out of the gate: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14–15). This may be the most concise summary of Jesus's teaching in the Bible, and it's all about *euangélion*.

Paul uses some form of *euangélion* more than seventy times in his epistles. “Good news” is the central expression that powers the church.

How Christians Are Different

What should we make of this? Well, for sure we must not treat the good news as if it were a typical religion. Typical religion is about doing what your god or gods require; it's following your beliefs and methods to achieve some goal or approval. This is true whether you're offering pagan sacrifices in an ancient temple or seeking enlightenment through meditation. You *do* something to *earn* something.

Let's face it: Christianity is often packaged this way. Live a good life and things will go well for you. Find the right spiritual resources and you'll be blessed. Ask Jesus into your heart and you'll be saved. This is why many people say all religions are the same. In some sense, they're right.

But Jesus didn't bring typical religion. He brought *good news*.

I used to work in a television newsroom. Our best stories were always those with an immediate effect on our viewers' lives. For example, if there's a heavy snowstorm, it will almost always lead off a local newscast. The principle is, "Here's what's happened, and it will change your life." News is not what *you* do—it's what someone else has done that affects you.

The good news means you relate to God based on what *Jesus* has done for you, not what you've done to prove yourself worthy. If you're a believer, the good news says that God already accepts you fully—he's adopted you as his child—because you're joined to Jesus, who died on the cross for you.

Yes, believing this means a changed life. Flat out. You'll have a hungry, iron grip on Jesus. You'll run after him forcefully. But you'll do it because you rest in him. All your effort to obey will be a response to what he's already done, never a performance to win his favor. There's no need for such scheming. No pressure. No false fronts.

The typical lesson for kids isn't like this. Instead, it tends to be what mine were for years—little more than a lecture about some way you ought to live for God. Such lessons create pressure and invite pretending.

We've been dispensing good advice instead of the good news. Eventually, kids will tire of our advice, no matter how good it might be. Many will leave the church. Others will live decent, churchy lives but without any fire for Christ. We'll wonder why they've rejected the good news, because we assumed they were well grounded in it. In fact, they never were. Although we told stories of Jesus and his free grace, we watered it down with self-effort—and *that's* what they heard.

Fellow teachers, our challenge is to proclaim the good news of Jesus so clearly and consistently that no kid of ours will ever place him in a category with typical religious leaders. Our calling is to be good-news fanatics. I stress this because if I don't, someone will hear me talk of teaching about Jesus and get the wrong idea. They will think, "Yes, we ought to teach kids to be like Jesus and to follow his example." This would be *typical* religion.

What a tyrant Jesus would be if he lived a perfect life and then, as his main message, told us to be like him. What a setup for failure! What discouragement and worry would mark our lives! What masquerades they would be! We must understand that our central hope is in Jesus's *full* saving work, not just his instructions, and that kids will be stuck in the pressure-filled mode of trying to measure up unless we bombard them with this *good news*.

One more thing about the good news: when it comes to teaching it, all of us are clumsy. We all begin life inclined to try to earn our way before God. We all must learn to teach against our first instincts.

QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT BE ASKING

Why shouldn't I just follow the lesson points in my teacher's manual, or read my kids a children's devotional? Don't the folks who publish those materials know better than I do what kids need to hear?

Some published lessons are better than others. If you search, you can find several with good stuff. But few teachers always follow them straight through. Most of us use them as starting points and then pick and choose what works for us. We change things and add our own insights and activities that seem right. We chat with kids about what

matters to us and about what we know matters to them. Good teaching is personal. If you use published material, make the good news the guide by which you tailor your lessons.

But what if I add something about Jesus and get it wrong?

An eager teacher who puts extra thought into a lesson—and shares what he or she’s learned about Jesus—beats a timid one every time. You’re right that if you try often enough to be Jesus-centered, you might eventually teach something half-baked. We should work hard to avoid that, and the second section of this book will help. But it still could happen. That’s okay. The greater error is to teach from the Bible and fail to point out Jesus at all.

Wouldn’t it be better to say we should be God-centered? Aren’t you leaving out whole chunks of teaching about God by focusing only on Jesus?

The disciples said the same thing—to Jesus’s face! “‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’” (John 14:8–10). Although we look to the entire Bible for a full picture of God, the most complete picture we find is Jesus himself. The Bible tells us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God [is seen] in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). A focus on Jesus *is* God-centered. Plus, to love Jesus is the godliest activity imaginable. The Father has loved the Son perfectly, for eternity. Loving Jesus isn’t ignoring the Father—it’s imitating him. The theologian John Owen put it this way: “Nothing renders us so like unto God as our love unto Jesus Christ, for he is the principle object of his love; in him doth his soul rest, in him he is always well pleased.”²

Did I read you right? Did you say “Ask Jesus into your heart and you’ll be saved” is not the good news?

Kids *do* need to respond to Jesus in faith, and the call to do so is part of the good news. But the good news is also more than just

“Ask Jesus.” We too easily turn faith into little requirements—like saying a certain prayer—that end up being all about something external *we* must do. On Pentecost, Peter preached the good news of what *Jesus* has done (using the Old Testament like Joe did, I might add). He didn’t immediately ask for a behavioral response, but first let that good news lead to a heart response: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37) Only then did Peter tell his listeners to repent and be baptized, as a necessary part of what God was already working in them. I’ll say more about how the good news works in nonbelievers in chapter 3.

It seems to me that Samuel is a good example of a kid who listened. Why shouldn’t I teach that?

You could. There’s nothing wrong with that. The Bible *does* give us useful examples. However, all too often that’s all kids get from a lesson, instead of what they need most. If they get Samuel the good listener without first appreciating God the Great Speaker, they’re liable to end up relating to God only in an anxious, what-I-must-do way. Joe’s discussion time about how the lesson applied to life on the playground was important. It showed how God’s speech to Samuel three thousand years ago matters to Jesus’s followers today, and it encouraged the kids to believe and act on it. It’s good to challenge kids to obey God. Just make sure they’re responding out of faith in the love of Jesus, not out of mere moralism.

You also wouldn’t have to emphasize God’s speaking at all. There are other themes in the Samuel story, like God’s determination to end injustice or his provision of a good king (the broader theme of the whole book of 1 Samuel), and these too would make fine lessons that lead to Jesus. I’ll explain how to create such lessons in chapter 6.

The way Joe taught the Samuel story just seems too hard to me. I could never come up with all that.

You don’t have to. Joe was actually a very experienced teacher with much practice. It’s okay to start small. Begin by mentioning just one

or two ways the good news of Jesus applies to each lesson you teach. In time, build on that. Remember, even Paul didn't think he spoke the good news particularly well. The power is in the message. If you know the good news of Jesus and dare to tell it, you are supremely gifted to advance God's kingdom—no matter how well you speak.

SHOW THEM JESUS RIGHT AWAY

It's good to take action immediately, while you're thinking about it. How can you apply these ideas right now? You might pick one or more of the suggestions from the list below:

Teachers: Pick a specific spot to talk about the cross of Jesus in your next lesson, discussion session, worship time, or whatever you lead. Besides helping your students see Jesus, this will accomplish two things: (1) you'll get used to looking for ways to connect the cross to every part of Christian life, and (2) you'll get comfortable talking about the cross, which sometimes feels weird until we get used to it. Be deliberate about doing this in every session you lead—*every one!*—until you've done it so much that talking about how Jesus died for us feels easy and natural.

Find another teacher who's committed to showing kids Jesus in every lesson. Arrange to sit in on a class. Afterward, note the things that teacher did to teach the good news—things you can learn from. Remember not to critique what the other teacher does wrong but to learn from what he or she gets right, and to let that teacher know what you appreciated!

Parents: If you feel uncomfortable talking with your kids about how Jesus died for us, start changing that right now by building a habit of mentioning the cross. Work it into family devotions, discussions in the car, or whatever you like. If you can't settle on any other specific time to mention it, simply add it to regular prayers at mealtime or bedtime. Pray something like: "Father, thank you for giving your Son Jesus to die for our sins." You can adjust the wording, but say the prayer *daily*, and engage in other Jesus discussions until talk of the cross becomes natural and no longer feels weird in your home.

Grandparents: If you don't see your grandkids regularly, write each of them a letter. Like Paul's letter to the Corinthians, make sure it says something about Jesus. Kids love getting mail, and they'll especially love getting a letter from *you!*

Anyone: Consider using the story of the boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3) to guide your personal devotions for a few days. Do it in three steps.

1. *Notice* ways God acts in the story. There are more than I mentioned in this chapter, so you might want to write them down.
2. *Meditate* on ways Jesus acts the same in the New Testament, as well as today, and thank him for the kind of Savior he is.
3. *Share.* The next time you're alone with your kids or have a few extra minutes in class, share about your time studying Samuel and what you learned. Let your kids observe your own desire to see Jesus.

Chapter 2

The God Report Card

Because the good news is like nothing else

This is the great mystery of the gospel
in the blood of Christ, that those who sin every day
should have peace with God all their days.

—John Owen¹

It was the Sunday after Christmas, and the group I taught was typical for that week. Many students were gone. Some who remained had relatives visiting and brought their cousins to Sunday school.

One of these visitors was a middle schooler named Nicole. She seemed comfortable being in church. She joined in our prayer circle and knew some of the worship songs. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we'd studied the birth of Jesus from Luke, and as I reviewed those lessons, Nicole was eager to share what she knew about those stories. I figured she probably had a decent grasp of the good news—after all, she was a church kid.

THE ONLY ONE WHO OBEYED

For our post-Christmas lesson we were continuing in Luke with the story of Jesus's visit to Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old. By this time I'd learned to teach the good news every week, so I started by reminding the kids how characters in the birth narrative called baby Jesus the Savior, the Son of God, and the eternal King who brings forgiveness.

Then I asked, “But do you know what Jesus himself said? Does anyone know the first thing the Bible mentions Jesus saying about why he came?”

The answer, of course, is in the story of Jesus’s visit to Jerusalem with his parents. As they headed home he was missing. They searched three days before finding him in the temple, where we get his first recorded words: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). That comment is packed with meaning. Jesus wasn’t just referring to the temple. To be in his Father’s house meant to be employed by his Father. To obey. To do—and finish—the work the Father sent him to do.

Jesus went home with his parents “and was submissive to them” (Luke 2:51). As for obeying God, the cost becomes clear as Luke’s Gospel unfolds. On his last visit to Jerusalem, Jesus again failed to leave. Rather than flee danger, he went just a few steps beyond its walls to the one place where he knew soldiers would come to capture him—Gethsemane. There he prayed to his Father, “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

I included all this in my lesson to show the big picture. Luke didn’t write about Jesus the twelve-year-old to give my kids an example they could relate to and follow. Rather, Luke paints a portrait of a Savior who submits so completely to God—both to God’s law and to God’s plan of redemption through the cross—that we can only watch in wonder. The main point is not that we too should obey, but that Jesus *did* obey.

I thought it was a clever lesson, but Nicole just looked puzzled. I explained how we often fail to obey our parents and God, but how as Christians we can still be confident, happy, and eager to obey the next time. I explained that this is because we belong to Jesus, who did obey and died in our place to make our lives pleasing to God. I thought that would help.

I was wrong. For Nicole, the idea that Jesus’s obedience could have any bearing on what God thinks of *her* just didn’t make sense. “That’s crazy,” she finally said.

I sat there for a while, not sure what to say. Then I remembered that in my box of teaching supplies I had an object lesson that might help. I asked the kids to wait while I dug around for it. Sure enough, there was the God Report Card.

FIRST, A WARNING

I'll get back to Nicole's story later in this chapter. First, I need to more fully explain what I mean by the "good news."

Let me start with a warning: The good news offends everyone. At some point it will offend *you*. It might be the gruesomeness of the cross. It might be the absolute freeness of salvation, or how that includes giving up your self-directed life. It may be something else entirely. But if you're honest, at some point you'll say, "Wait, *I don't like this.*"

Paul made this very point: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22–24).

First-century Jews and Greeks are long gone, but we know their types. The Greeks were worldly-wise; they considered themselves smarter than people of backwoods religions, where blood sacrifice ruled the day. The cross violated their enlightened sensibilities. That God would send his Son to die was folly—primitive and senseless. How would *that* help you get ahead in the world?

The Jews, on the other hand, didn't mind sacrifices but wouldn't let go of their demanding self-righteousness and their trust in religious observances. "Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works" (Romans 9:32). The Jews insisted on the need to *do something* to impress God.

Most churchgoers I know give the cross lip service, but deep down they're like either the Greeks or the Jews. To "Greeks," the cross is an embarrassment. It's about sin and the wrath of God and the way we must obey a deity who makes all the rules. Wouldn't it be healthier to

avoid such negative talk? To “Jews,” the cross is dangerous. It’s about a frightening idea that sometimes our fancy prayers and religious works only serve to keep us distant from God. The idea that God wipes out a lifetime of sin at the cross—with no contribution at all from our churchy habits—makes us squirm. After all, if all the work was done at the cross, how could we compare ourselves to others and still come out on the narrow road?

For both groups, the cross is best kept on the margins. It’s uncomfortable. Scandalous.

In light of all this, we might downplay the cross. Then we wouldn’t offend anyone. For years I tiptoed around the cross for this very reason. But this offends the good news itself. I’m beginning to see that God designed the cross to shock absolutely *everyone*.

So, you’ve been warned. One test that you’re teaching the true good news is that you’ve personally had to struggle with its insult. Another is that sooner or later someone—perhaps even a “pillar of the church”—will hear about what you’re teaching and complain.

WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS?

The good news encompasses so much, but the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15 give a helpful summary.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.
(1 Corinthians 15:1–4)

Let’s frame our discussion around the essence of what Paul says is “of first importance”—the simple phrase, “Christ died for our sins.” We’ll drill into the core of the good news in three steps:

1. Christ
2. Died
3. For our sins.

The good news is about Jesus Christ.

It's real news about the eternal Son of God who became a living, breathing person named Jesus, who died and rose again and still lives today. If we keep reading in 1 Corinthians 15, we will see Paul mention person after person who saw Jesus in the flesh after his resurrection.

Jesus's death and resurrection is more than a poignant idea that helps us love God. It indeed gives us love, but this is because the cross is the actual loving act that kindles our own love, and Jesus is the real and risen Savior who rescues all who are his.

He's the sort of man who powerfully hushed the most violent storm with a word and then, on the next page, lovingly touched the festering skin of a leper. He told religious blowhards they were sons of the devil and told prostitutes they were forgiven. He raised the dead and directed the praise for it away from himself. Remarkable.

Jesus's title, Christ, means "anointed." Priests, prophets, and kings were all anointed in biblical times. Jesus too is our priest, our go-between with the Father, but it doesn't stop there. He's also the supreme prophet and teacher from whom we learn the mysteries of God. And he's our Creator King, the eternal guardian to whom we owe all allegiance. He is wisdom incarnate, the Good Shepherd, Lord of lords and King of kings. *That guy* died for our sins.

The good news is about Jesus's death and resurrection.

This is a narrow definition, given how the good news soaks absolutely every part of Christian life. But narrow is helpful; it ensures that the cross and the resurrection remain our focus, even when we broaden our spotlight to take in more.

All of God's saving work is connected. This means that the good news includes some critical things that happened long *before* the cross.

God chose us in Jesus “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). Salvation was already at work in the Old Testament’s stories, laws, prophecies, and wisdom—so in a broad sense this all might be called good news. Yet we don’t get a clear announcement until the angels visit the shepherds and Jesus begins his ministry, and we don’t see it fully realized until the cross.

Likewise, Jesus’s victory is applied to us *after* the resurrection in ways we mustn’t forget when considering the scope of the good news. He ascended to heaven to advocate and reign for us. We have adoption as sons, Spirit-enabled holiness, and future glory. But all of these flow from Jesus’s finished work on the cross. This is why I often speak of the good news in the more narrow sense, which Paul says is “of first importance.” It’s usually helpful to think of our ongoing good works, in particular, as separate from the good news itself. Even as we give our lives for God’s kingdom, this is only an echo of the life Jesus gave.

The good news is that Jesus died for our sins.

Jesus lived a perfect life and had no sin of his own to condemn him, but he took our place as a substitute. This means that although we still sin, *at the same time* we can also be completely accepted and loved by a holy God who hates sin.

A good-news teacher must not sugarcoat God’s demands. The Bible describes sin as our willful rebellion against God and all that’s delightful in the universe. God is Father, Son, and Spirit—each person loving the others. He created us to reflect that love and to care for his good world. But we chose self-interest and self-effort above the beauty of God, spurning our Creator. Our adultery stunk up his world. If I had a dead skunk in my house, it would be good for me to get rid of it. In the same way, God would have been right to destroy us.

But God didn’t destroy us. Instead, in all the torments of sin Jesus took our place.

- *Sin means we were doomed to die. But Jesus died to give us eternal life.* “[He] died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:10).
- *Sin means we were cursed. But Jesus became cursed to make us blessed.* “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).
- *Sin means we were shamed. But Jesus endured the shame of the cross to give us honor.* “He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Colossians 1:22).
- *Sin means we were guilty. But Jesus was condemned and punished so we could be declared not guilty,* “canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14).
- *Sin means we were enemies of God and deserving of his anger. But Jesus deflected that wrath onto himself to give us God’s favor.* “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10).
- *Sin means we were shut out from fellowship with God. But Jesus died alone on the cross so we might never be lonely again.* “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).
- *Sin means we had no hope of lasting happiness. But Jesus suffered sadness to give us eternal joy.* “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4).

Now we who were spiritual stinkers, unable to please God, are set free to serve a risen Savior. “He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15). It’s a stunning turnaround.

And the reason? God’s reason for giving his only Son to be punished, killed, spurned, shamed, and so on is that *he loves us*. The same love the Father has for the Son—that eternal, perfect, fatherly love—God extends to us.

THE KID WHO CRIED

Knowing we're saved is critical. If we somehow think we never were in hellish danger, we might still admire Jesus, but we won't love him.

I once was teaching a group of kindergartners when the topic turned to how we sometimes get angry. One student commented loudly that Jesus said anyone who gets angry will go to hell. I confirmed that Jesus did say something like that.

Well, another little boy started to cry. I felt terrible. I was sure I'd allowed too much about sin and judgment. What to do? I had just enough sense to turn the discussion to the good news. I said, "Yes, Jesus did say if you get angry for a bad reason you deserve for God to punish you. But Jesus never got angry for a bad reason. So who deserves to be punished, you or Jesus?"

"We do," they said.

"But who *did* get punished? Who died on the cross?" I asked.

"Jesus."

"That's right," I said. "Jesus already got the punishment. So if you belong to Jesus, even if you get angry, God won't punish you. It wouldn't be fair to punish you because Jesus already got punished instead."

The little boy who'd been crying looked up. For a few seconds he studied me to see if I was serious. Then he grinned. A huge grin. The kind of smile that nearly made *me* cry.

It was one of those rewarding moments that makes years of teaching worthwhile, and it never would have happened if I'd merely been teaching that Jesus died for us. The boy had heard that line before. But because this time he'd experienced a sharper conviction of his sin in the face of God's holiness—a *need* to be saved—the good news brought joy. That smile was worship. Jesus became bigger to him.

HOW TO STAND LIKE A CHRISTIAN

The good news isn't just about escaping punishment. It's also new life. Our 1 Corinthians 15 passage says we must *hold fast* to it. Once it's preached and received, it becomes the gospel *in which you stand*. In Jesus, we have status to stand before God, doing his bidding and

enjoying his care. Notice how this is current. Day by day we continue to stand in the good news. It has ongoing value.

Even though the good news is what Jesus has done—not anything we do—as we believe it, it compels us to action. Paul explains it this way: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Our salvation is generous and full. Yes, we’re saved by grace alone—but God knows we not only need to be loved in spite of our stench, but also to become non-stinkers. He includes as part of salvation our rebirth into people who erupt in true worship of our Savior—with good works.

We are *created in Christ Jesus*. Joined to him by faith, we can do what formerly was unthinkable. We begin to do truly selfless works. They aren’t worth a cent for earning God’s love; but because we’re in Christ, God finds us pleasing. He accepts our bumbling acts done in thankfulness as offerings to him. We’re redeemed that we “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:74–75).

The good news heals, and then it empowers. It makes us eager to serve God and our neighbor. As the Holy Spirit grows it within us, showing us more and more what standing and power we have in Jesus, the good news continues to renew us as long as we live. It’s what teachers everywhere hope for their students.

IF GOD GAVE GRADES

Nicole and the other kids from the beginning of this chapter couldn’t understand why Jesus’s obedience should matter to them. It sounded like a bit of doctrine with little impact on daily life—a lame lesson.

I got a manila envelope out of my teaching box and showed it to the kids. On it was printed “Report Card” and under that a line for a name. I wrote “me” on the line.

“Imagine this is your report card and you have to show it to God,” I told them. “Instead of schoolwork, you earn grades in five godly subjects: obeying your parents, generosity, kindness, telling the truth, and putting yourself last. What grades do you think you’ve earned?”

A few kids thought they might have As in a subject or two. Most told me what I’ve heard from hundreds of kids over the years—they thought they should get Bs and Cs. Nicole was particularly interested in the question, assigning herself a range of grades from a B+ in kindness to a D in generosity. “I like my stuff too much,” she explained. “I know God wants me to be more generous.”

“I get that way too,” I told her. “But I’m glad you can see that God is strict. In fact, he’s so strict that no matter how well we do, every one of us earns exactly the same grades from God.”

I opened the envelope and pulled out the report card. Next to each spiritual subject, written in dark marker, was a large F.

Some kids were surprised. So I explained that God is so holy that we have to be perfect. Anything less is an F. “What would it be like for you to bring home all Fs on a real report card?” I asked.

The kids said they’d be discouraged. They’d be scared of their parents’ anger and of punishment. One boy even said his dad might stop picking him up from school. “Someone might see me getting in his car,” he said, “and if they knew about the Fs, they’d think we were a bad family.”

That admission made us somber. We talked about how shame is one result of our sin. “But the good news is that God fixes our sin problem,” I said. “Does anyone know what he does?”

“He forgives us?” someone suggested.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s like erasing all our Fs. But could he do something even better? If I erased all the Fs on this report card, what would I have left?”

“A blank report card.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And I wouldn’t feel good about a blank report card either. I’d have to work very hard to try to earn some good

grades so it wouldn't be blank anymore. That's what happens when we think that God only forgives us. We still feel impossible pressure to do good things to make him happy."

"God could give us all As."

"Now you're getting somewhere," I said. "But an A doesn't mean anything unless someone earned it. And we aren't good enough to earn As. So where's an A going to come from?" The kids didn't know. They were out of ideas.

"Okay, let me show you the good news," I said. I reached into my box and pulled out a second report card. This one had "Jesus" printed on the envelope.

"Jesus lived a perfect life," I said. "He earned an A+ in everything." Then I opened the Jesus envelope and pulled out his report card, marked with an A+ in every subject. I took that card and put it in the envelope marked "me." Then I took the card with all the Fs and put it in the envelope marked "Jesus."

The Protest

"Nuh-uh! You can't do that!" It was Nicole.

"Jesus and I just traded report cards," I told her. "Why don't you like that?"

"You can't do that to him," she told me. "It's wrong."

I was expecting this. Nearly every time I've revealed the solution to the God Report Card, some students have protested. Often they don't like how easy it is to get all As. In this case, Nicole's main concern was with the other side of the equation. She was bothered by Jesus getting the Fs.

I asked, "Haven't you ever heard that Jesus died for your sins?"

She had, of course. But as Nicole tried to explain, it became clear she'd always imagined a noble Jesus bravely going to the cross to die. Now she was hit with the idea that Jesus took on something more—something like coming home with a bad report card and getting punished, feeling disgrace, and receiving anger he didn't deserve. "It's embarrassing for him," she explained.

“Yes, it was,” I agreed. “Lots of people have died for someone else. But no one has come close to doing as much as Jesus did for you. Jesus didn’t deserve to be punished—his resurrection proves that—but on the cross, he got whatever *you* deserve. Even your shame. He took it all.”

Nothing to Earn

Nicole still wanted to know why I seemed happy to teach that Jesus got Fs. So I turned the discussion to her feelings about God. “I notice you worship and pray,” I told her. “Why do you do those things?”

“Sometimes it’s fun,” she answered, “but mostly because it’s good. God wants you to. Even when it’s not so fun, I feel better afterwards.”

“Well, I’m glad you worship and pray,” I said. “But it sounds like you’re mostly doing it to get God to like you. You feel good about yourself when you do well—and guilty when you don’t.” Nicole agreed.

“So let’s talk about how we’d feel if we knew we had a report card that was already all A+’s,” I said.

The kids told me they’d no longer be scared at all. One girl was sure her parents would reward her with ice cream. I suggested that since the good marks all came from Jesus, the kids might work hard to add a few marks they’d actually earned so they could be proud of what *they’d* done. But they all understood that would be foolish, and disrespectful of what Jesus had given them.

“Good,” I said. “Now you understand one of the big ways Christians are different from everyone else. We Christians get our good record—the Bible calls it ‘righteousness’—from God. It doesn’t come from what we do. Lots of people try to stop being bad. But Christians also stop trying to prove how good they are.”

It was time for class to end, so I turned and spoke to Nicole. “If you’re joined to Jesus, God is pleased with you. Like he is with Jesus. Like you obey *that* perfectly. Of course you still have a duty to actually obey God, but it’s not the kind of duty that comes because you need to keep him from getting grumpy. It’s the kind of higher duty that comes from being loved, and in love. Only the righteousness you get from

Jesus will ever make you completely, *perfectly* accepted, like getting all A+'s. No more shame.

“Believe it. Believe that you’re safe in Jesus. Believe that his love for you doesn’t change. The more you believe this, the less you’ll pray and read the Bible and worship because you’re scared you have to. You’ll do it because you *want* to.”

Nicole nodded seriously. I could tell she got it, though I think she found it hard to believe. That’s okay—the good news *is* unbelievably good. I gave her a smile and dismissed everyone.

NOTHING BETTER

The God Report Card is a rich illustration. It helps clarify how a life based on Christ’s death for our sins is better than any of the lesser ways we might be tempted to approach God:

It’s better than moralism.

Merely trying to live a good life makes kids either proud or frustrated. But the good news allows for no pride, since we’ve done nothing to earn the righteousness we’re given. Nor does it allow despair, since only Jesus had to measure up. Kids can be humble, yet supremely confident of God’s approval.

It’s better than grudging forgiveness.

It trumps the lie that God forgives us when necessary but still counts on us to do our best, looking down on us with frequent scowls. Like a blank report card, grudging forgiveness leaves kids anxious about living for God. The good news frees them to enjoy a life of service to a God who’s on their side.

It’s better than cheap grace.

It beats the notion of a coddling God who easily loves you as long as you’re pretty good or you once said the right prayer—no problem for him, no further demands on you. Cheap grace sounds comforting, but God ends up irrelevant and boring. The good news shows how sin

is deadly serious and required costly love from Jesus. It captures kids' hearts for a worthy God who rightly calls for whole-life repentance.

It's better than therapeutic religion.²

We too often think a Christian life means finding the right kind of prayer, worship, teaching, and other "Jesus stuff" that'll make us feel good or develop better habits. But the good news says that the Christian experience is a complete change of being. God has rescued us from death to life, and from shame to glory. This is far more motivating than self-improvement.

It's better than Jesus-as-example.

Doing good in the world, like Jesus did, is important. But Jesus-as-example alone gives kids no power to actually live in the self-sacrificing way Jesus modeled. Only when they're powered by the good news will they follow with abandon. Then there will be no stopping them.

The good news does not let Christianity become a guidebook by which kids adjust their lives. Adjustments are not enough, and bare rules are for flunkies who have no share in the family business. *We* are heirs of the King. We are reborn. We've emerged from catastrophe in a burst from God that leaves us stunned, exhilarated, and irreversibly transformed.

I wanted to say all this to Nicole. I'd only taught her one aspect of being joined to Jesus. I wanted to add how we're adopted, making it a thrill to obey the Father who loves and welcomes us. I could have told her how we're made holy so that we boldly live like the new people we are in Christ. I could have told her of eternal hope, and how the promise of resurrection drives us to serve God with eager expectation. Why not consider how *every part* of the good news is fuel for a confident Christian life?

Nicole was already heading down the hall with her cousins. I thought about chasing after them. Maybe we could talk more over

lunch, their families and mine—but I stopped myself. They probably had plans. Besides, what middle schooler wants to spend her Christmas break listening to some teacher rant on about Jesus?

It would take too long to tell it all and fully convey the wonder. It would take a lifetime.

QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT BE ASKING

It sounds like you're saying it doesn't matter how we act as Christians. Don't we still have to work hard to obey God?

This is a common objection whenever our acceptance in Jesus is presented in all its scandalous freeness. It's as old as the Bible itself: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1–2) In no way is it okay to keep sinning. The idea that God's grace might let us go ahead and sin misses how big a change it is to become a Christian. That idea belongs to our old life with its get-away-with-sin attitude. We're reborn. We have a new life with new and better incentives to obey God.

But with the God Report Card, shouldn't you include something about how we need to accept Jesus in order to receive those "good grades"?

Often I do teach the need to respond in repentance and faith to the good news, but I didn't do it with this lesson for two reasons. First, I wanted to focus on what Jesus did for us because we easily obsess over what *we* must do—and then the good news gets lost. If the Holy Spirit gets through to a kid's heart, a proper response will follow without much coaxing from me. Second, the point of our discussion was that believing the good news is a critical habit even *after* becoming a Christian. The lesson wasn't about how to be saved. The God Report Card is about how kids who are already believers can gain confidence and joy by understanding the good news that they're justified before God.

To say Jesus is the only way to be saved sounds exclusive and dismissive of other religions. Are you sure Jesus is that special?

Yup. That insistence on Jesus is part of the scandal of the good news. The Bible is clear about it, so to say otherwise is dismissive toward the Bible. If it helps, remember that no other major religion claims a figure anything like him—the Son of God become human, suffering the consequences of our sin and rising from the dead. He really *is* unique. If you still aren't sure, carefully read Colossians 1:15–23 and ask yourself if such a human being fits any other religion you know.

You said little about the teachings of Jesus. Isn't what he taught just as important as what he did?

What Jesus taught is extremely important. I just don't want us to miss what he did. We must not separate his teaching from his saving work, which is foundational. Luke wrote “to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). Jesus is first of all about things *accomplished*. Both Luke and Matthew begin by telling why the coming Messiah is important: He'll save the people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He'll reign forever and be the holy Son of God (Luke 1:32–35). He'll bring salvation from enemies (Luke 1:69–71). He'll be a Savior (Luke 2:11). Not a word about a great teacher coming. Jesus *is* a great teacher, of course—the best. Those who truly have him as their Savior also embrace him as their Teacher. Still, his teaching, like the rest of his life on earth, supports the central work of the cross.

If I used the God Report Card with my students, they'd have different responses than yours did. What do I do then?

Go with whatever is making an impact on your students. I find it's different every time. That's why we have that long list of the many problems Jesus solves by dying in our place. Any of them makes a fine talk about the good news. Nicole was impacted by the shame of the cross, so I used that as my angle.

Then what about all those other good news themes?

Use them next time—or the time after that. It's good to give kids many exposures to the good news from different starting points and angles. Every Bible story features a unique way that God cares for his people. If you find it and then teach the good news from that starting point, you'll constantly give your students new chances for the good news to click with them. You'll learn more about that later in this book.

I realize we have to acknowledge sin. But if I talk about it too much with the kids I teach, they just feel guilty and down on themselves. Are you sure that's a good idea?

Well, you've diagnosed those kids' core spiritual problem. Their true trust is in their own ability to act like good Christians, and your talk about sin exposes them as failures. Kids who trust in being good can't handle reminders of their sin. It destroys their self-confidence, precisely because it *is* confidence in self.

For those who firmly trust Jesus, even a hard look at their sin only makes them appreciate him more. The cure for kids who feel burdened by sin is not to ignore the topic (they feel the burden anyway, even if they aren't talking about it), but to administer large doses of the good news so that their trust in Jesus grows. We are sinners but no longer guilty, no longer unclean, no longer ashamed.

SHOW THEM JESUS RIGHT AWAY

You're ready now to make and teach with your own God Report Cards, or put what you've learned into action some other way. Here are a few ideas:

Parents: Use card paper and manila envelopes to make report cards for you and each of your children. You'll each need a blank envelope with a space to write a name on it, and a card inside that lists godly activities with blank spaces to give grades. Each of you will also need a second, filled-out envelope with Jesus's name on it and an identical card inside that lists those godly activities with grades of A+ already awarded—but keep those Jesus cards hidden at first.

1. Pass out the blank report cards and have each child write his or her name on it. Have them fill in whatever grades they think they've earned.
2. Discuss the grades they gave themselves. Explain God's demand for perfection, and have everyone change their grades to all Fs.
3. Discuss what a problem this is. Let the kids offer solutions (none of which is as good as God's solution).
4. Reveal God's solution by giving each child a Jesus Report Card. Tell how Jesus earned the A+'s we can't, and have the kids swap their cards with the ones for Jesus.
5. Talk about what the swap means for both Jesus and you. What did Jesus do for you? How is being freely forgiven and receiving righteousness from God different from *earning* our own righteousness? You might read 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew so sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Teachers: Make a set of God Report Cards (described for parents above) to keep with your teaching supplies. This way, you'll always have a teaching tool handy to bring out and demonstrate when your classroom discussions take a turn that calls for it. Or, if there's another illustration of the good news that you prefer, make yourself a visual aid for teaching that. But make sure you have *something*. It's much easier to launch into impromptu explanations of the good news when you have an illustration or prop ready to go at any time.

Teachers of younger kids: The God Report Card may be too abstract for kids under age eight or nine to grasp well. Try these alternatives to teach younger kids the same idea:

- *Younger elementary.* Use removable, nametag-sized stickers. Have kids write or draw pictures of sins they do on some of the stickers, and stick those sins onto their body or

clothing. Have other stickers for Jesus. Write or draw pictures of the ways Jesus obeyed God's law (he helped hurting people, obeyed his parents, etc.) and stick those onto a piece of poster board with "Jesus" written on it. Talk about the difference between us and Jesus. Then swap stickers to show how he took our sin on himself and gives us his righteousness.

- *Preschool.* Play with puppets, dolls, or stuffed animals. Act out a situation where one of the puppets is naughty and has to be punished (like with a time-out). The other puppet does nothing wrong and deserves no punishment. Then have the innocent puppet volunteer to take the punishment the guilty puppet deserved. Talk about how Jesus did something like that for us. We deserve to be punished for how we disobey God; Jesus took our punishment in our place, even though he didn't deserve it.

Anyone: Get more familiar with the good news by doing a simple Bible study of some of the major benefits that come to you because you're joined to Jesus. Here's a list:

- *Justification.* You are declared "not guilty" and credited with Christ's righteousness (Romans 3:21–24).
- *Adoption.* You become a child of God (Romans 8:14–17).
- *Sanctification.* You more and more learn to live like the holy person you've already begun to be (Titus 2:11–15).
- *Glorification.* One day God's work for you, and in you, will be complete as you're made perfect (1 Corinthians 15:42–44).

Take one of these benefits at a time and consider two questions: (1) What does the passage say is wonderful about what I receive in Jesus? (2) How does this motivate me to live for Jesus? Be sure either to do this study with the kids you teach or to share afterward with them what you learned.